

# What If Hackworth Was Right:

How can Leaders Encourage the Growth of Learning  
Organizations in an Army that Grows More  
Bureaucratic by the Day?

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## **Hackworth and Army Leadership**

I first heard about the Army's love/hate relationship with Hackworth while in the US Army Infantry Captain's Career Course. The 11<sup>th</sup> Regimental Commander at the time told a few of us during a formal that the Infantry School had invited Colonel Hackworth to talk to the students and he had declined. "Since then, I don't read what he has to say about us, he's just a complainer", I remember him saying. After reading Hackworth's book later during my career, I remember thinking two things: he was at times too little of a politician to get important things accomplished and he seemed to be surrounded by a tragic number of "ticket punchers". Seeing many careerists myself during my time in the Army I felt some amount of sympathy with Hackworth's plight, especially with him being in combat and experiencing people dying because of the poor leadership some of his commanders exhibited.

Nevertheless, what of Hackworth's assertions, that the Army was too political at the top and not interested in soldiers- even soldiers who were dying? Surely there were examples of gross-poor leadership in all wars, but such a damning statement seemed to be too contrary to all of the high-flying Army values that I found hanging on walls at most Army post buildings. Were these statements simply taglines for those naïve junior leaders who would bear the brunt of any war while the "ticket-punchers" and General Officers stepped on them on their way to the top? And maybe that would explain why even though the Army has long talked of being a Learning Organization, by many measurements it appears to have fallen short: in essence we like to say things that we really do not do. Somehow, I did not think the reality was that simple.

## Learning Organization... Or Not?

There have been many articles written already about whether or not the U.S. Army is a Learning Organization. These range in time from the mid-Nineties with Margaret Wheatley's 1994 article, "Can the US Army Become a Learning Organization?" which answered in the affirmative, to post 9/11 articles like LTC Gerras' 2002 article, "The Army as a Learning Organization" which says "no". In between are books and articles that take both sides, so the jury might still be out. Peter Senge, in his oft-cited work, *The Fifth Discipline*, explains five characteristics of what a Learning Organization attempts to build: systems thinkers, continual learners, objective minds, a shared vision, and team learning.<sup>1</sup> Most works that lean towards the Army as lacking in the learning department explain how it does not: provide instruction on systems thinking, reward those who learn on their own, encourage divergent views, obtain bottom-up buy-in of the Army vision, nor institutionalize team learning.<sup>2</sup> Those works that lean the other direction point out the use of After-Action Reviews (AARs), the Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), the open atmosphere of the War College (and presumably other Army educational institutions), Transformation prior to the threat being clear, and changing into a counterinsurgency force in the face of setbacks in Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Senge, Peter M., *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990. List of "disciplines": online at <http://leeds-faculty.colorado.edu/larsenk/learnorg/senge.html> (Accessed on 27 OCT 08).

<sup>2</sup> Williams, John D., COL, "Is the U.S. Army a Learning Organization?", US Army War College Strategy Research Project, Mar 2007: 23. Online at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA469631&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf> (Accessed on 30 OCT 2007). Also see: Nagl, John A., *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002: xiv; and, Richard, John S. COL, "The Learning Army, Approaching the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as a Learning Organization", US Army War College Strategy Research Project, May 1997: iv. Online at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA327188&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf> (Accessed on 30 OCT 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Bucha, Peter J. COL, "The U.S. Army War College: A Model Learning Organization for the Army?", US Army War College Strategy Research Project, April 1996: 29. Online at <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA309579&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf> (Accessed on 30 OCT 2007). Also

Perhaps an end to this debate is found in Senge's book itself, as he states there is no way to become a Learning Organization, as it is more of "a journey, not a destination".<sup>4</sup>

Therefore the U.S. Army could theoretically be somewhere along the journey in between starting it and becoming better at it. This begs the question, how do we tell whether we are getting better and can the entire bureaucracy really get past the first step, that of acknowledging that we have a problem?

The answer may lie in viewing the U.S. Army in different forms. Some parts of the U.S. Army could arguably contain characteristics of a Learning Organization. For example, there are attempts to send soldiers to get systems degrees, educate others with systems classes, and encourage self-study in systems thinking. There is at least verbal encouragement in some sectors, even if there are few material incentives, for self-education. Some branches do a better job of others in tolerating divergent viewpoints and rewarding (or at least not punishing) those who disagree in public with the boss. Bottom-up buy-in in vision is a little more complicated, all the more so since many do not understand what the vision is. However, the Army's vision is communicated fairly publicly and easily accessible by anyone even outside of the Army. Lastly, there is team learning, although one could argue that it is higher in some sectors than in others and culture of the different branches plays a large part in that. I would go further and say that depending on the unit, the branch, the commander, and the deployment rate, there are varying degrees of Learning Organizations in the Army on any given day. What is more

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see: Ignatius, David, "An Army That Learns", WashingtonPost.com, 13 JUL 2008. Online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/11/AR2008071102548.html> (Accessed on 30 OCT 2007); and Garvin, David A., *Learning in Action*, Harvard Business Press, 2000: 83-90. Online at [http://books.google.com/books?id=HAaZbow\\_cpUC&dq=Learning+in+Action%3A+A+Guide+to+Putting+the+Learning+Organization+to+Work&pg=PP1&lpg=PP1&sig=ACfU3U2e4k8Qki86IzITZiyzScowlitKfg&q=army#PPA83,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=HAaZbow_cpUC&dq=Learning+in+Action%3A+A+Guide+to+Putting+the+Learning+Organization+to+Work&pg=PP1&lpg=PP1&sig=ACfU3U2e4k8Qki86IzITZiyzScowlitKfg&q=army#PPA83,M1) (Accessed on 30 OCT 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Senge, 11. Online at The Managing-Leading Edge, <http://www.lciweb.com/MLEdge/Archives/MLE16LearningOrg.htm> (Accessed on 30 OCT 2007).

important, perhaps, is to ask the question, how can commanders lead their units towards being more of a Learning Organization, since espousing thoughts on how the entire Army could do so is problematic. The reasons have to do with complexity theory, the idea that the Army is not really one organization as much as it is a collection of many different organizations, and the possibility that government organizations who do not have the same pressures as money-making entities have (and therefore are not as narrowly focused on the proverbial “bottom-line”) must approach structuring Learning Organizations a little bit differently.

### **Battalion and Company Commanders are the Key**

If my hypothesis is correct, and the Chief of Staff of the Army would find it difficult to get the entire Army to becoming a Learning Organization, how does the Army go forward? To change at the Army level would require a sea-change in so many areas: ratings schemes, formal education, counseling, human resources, pay, promotions, mandatory briefings, and perhaps even the entire structure of the organization, that it would probably require a literal act of Congress and a few generations of pain. It is also arguable that the Army is even one single entity focused in all sectors on the same goals. For just one example, the differences between what a company of Special Forces soldiers shares as their vision and what a civilian U.S. Army Agency shares could potentially take up an entire book. With such divergences I would argue that trying a top-down approach for the entire organization would be problematic.

Instead, I would suggest that the highest level that a commander really has intimate contact with soldiers should be where a Learning Organization effort really

starts, that level being the battalion level. Battalion commanders could easily incorporate many of the principles of a Learning Organization in-house, without having to send soldiers for temporary duty or to try and communicate complicated concepts to people he or she would rarely, if ever, deal with (such as a Division Commander trying to get vision buy-in from the Pathfinder unit that is deployed separately to a different country). The company commanders as well could be intimately involved with their troops in establishing a learning environment and in nesting the company's efforts with the battalion's. This could be taken care of by counseling and some comments on the commander's rating card: something to the effect of establishing or improving specific parts of a Learning Organization within his or her unit. In addition, battalion commanders would be held responsible by the Chief of Staff for attending education on Learning Organizations and systems thinking, and be graded on specific goals for improving upon learning. Visions would be battalion-centric, ways of implementing learning could be unit-specific, and because many soldiers spend a relatively long time in one battalion, some type of team learning plan could be incorporated into doctrine for battalions, with supporting tasks for companies.

The bottom line is that if, as some writers have posited, the U.S. Army is no further along today than they were in 1995 to becoming a Learning Organization, then, absent Congressional action and this hypothesis proven wrong, it might just not happen. To compare the U.S. Army to General Electric, however, is also incorrect. GE has the relatively narrowly-focused pressures of making money, pleasing its customers, and fighting off competitors. The U.S. Army has its own pressures, but arguably they are many and much more varied than a money-making corporation. Thus, selecting a level

that provides a feasible and relatively simple chance at accomplishing the Learning Organization mantra is the best option.

## **Back to Hack**

Which brings me back to Hackworth: if Hackworth had a problem with the Army it was that there were officers getting promoted who knew more about getting good evaluations or keeping their noses clean than they did about keeping soldiers alive and accomplishing their missions.<sup>5</sup> Although some of his techniques and behavior could be called into question, his overarching vision was pretty tight: adapt to the enemy to become better at killing him than he is at killing you. Unconsciously he seemed to be a systems thinker, as he viewed the fight around him in a holistic manner. He was constantly trying to learn and constantly questioning what he was doing and looking for better ways. He read incessantly. It is arguable that he allowed much objectivity in his command, but I would argue that he built team learning better than anything I have ever read about. In the end, Hackworth relied on honesty: brutal, no-holds-barred honesty, to communicate to his superiors and presumably to get the on-the-ground picture from his subordinates. Everything else was secondary. This is perhaps the greatest tie-in to a Learning Organization, and one that if found lacking would infuriate anyone who is a systems thinker and has to deal with people who are interested in anything besides the mission and soldiers' lives. A Learning Organization product is a person who relies on the truth in order to make decisions: decisions that will improve upon what the

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<sup>5</sup> Hackworth, David and Sherman, Julie, 1989. *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior*, New York: Touchstone.

organization has been doing. Without the truth, it is all a waste of time and effort (and in the Army's case: lives).

Therefore, if a leader stands in the way of a unit becoming a Learning Organization, I would submit that they are failing in their responsibilities to the nation. Learning over time will accomplish the mission quicker with less loss of life and with less cost in materiel and money. But, I would differ with Hackworth in my criticism of the Army in terms of not meeting the expectations of a Learning Organization. Due to Complexity Theory, I would argue that the Army has grown to such a large and bureaucratic size that it has ceased to represent one entity. To me it would be like saying "the entire United States" is one entity and can be a learning organization. At some point things that large and complex are too unwieldy to transform the way they do business at the macro level. Instead, complexity theory would hold that micro changes will eventually cause complex systems to change.<sup>6</sup> What Hackworth, according to his autobiography, ran into were the symptoms of a bureaucracy: a large, complex organization that really was not clearly-recognizable singular entity. It is unrealistic to expect something that large and complicated to not exhibit the kinds of behavior that to a soldier on the ground seem to be anathema to the warrior ethos. That kind of behavior, however, is something that is systemic to large organizations. I would propose that for it to function in the complicated "world" that it exists in, especially at the higher levels where it competes for money with the other branches, fights political battles with different interest groups, sends strategic communications to other nations, and tries to

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<sup>6</sup> Beinhocker, Eric D. 2006. *The Origin of Wealth: The Radical Remaking of Economics and What It Means for Business and Society*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 18.



plan, prepare, and equip its forces, it has lost the connection at various levels to be one force focused on just “the fight”.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the U.S. Army might be incapable of becoming a Learning Organization for several reasons. It is not like the business community can show the Army a similarly-sized and missioned organization that is a good example to follow. The Army is unique and arguably, its stakeholders too varied and equally powerful for it to have a clear and realistic vision that allows its actions to mirror its words. Students at the Command and General Staff College, therefore, can stop debating whether the Army is or is not a Learning Organization: because of its nature, it cannot begin to be. Students can also stop being frustrated at the line of General Officers who come to tell them that the Army *is* a Learning Organization while at the same time becoming defensive about their units, belittling divergent viewpoints, and seeming to stay on point rather than take advantage of a non-attributive policy to talk about the brutal truth. An organization cannot learn when its leaders are not free to focus on one common vision, and this may be problematic when an organization serves many masters: from politicians to the soldiers that do its fighting and everyone in-between. But, lower-level units, like battalions and companies, can foster a learning environment and the Army is doing just that today, albeit slowly and non-uniformly.

The Army as a whole does have some initiatives in place that act as facilitators to being a Learning Organization: some of its culture, CALL, AARs, education, and a tradition of service, but it could do more. Maybe when our leaders realize that the

realistic level for the Army to be a Learning Organization is at the tactical level, they can start to focus on making it easier for that to happen. To wait until huge macro changes take place, to include culture and the connection to many stakeholders, is to be unrealistic. This kind of change would also follow Complexity Theory precepts in that the bottom up changes could eventually change the whole, and that higher initiatives rarely take long-term effect if pushed down from above. Hackworth, I think, would have appreciated anything that facilitated a battalion to operate more effectively. He recognized that in a counterinsurgency battle it was the most effective headquarters element for the platoons and companies that had to do the real fighting of the enemy. I would argue that the battalion is also the most effective Army headquarters to be the advocate for learning.